

BOOK REVIEWS

THE OTHER WORLD: SPIRITUALISM AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH IN ENGLAND, 1850–1914, by Janet Oppenheim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. Pp. xii + 503. \$44.50, cloth.

In recent years parapsychology has attracted the attention of various historians. Janet Oppenheim's *The Other World* is the most recent example of this trend of scholarly explorations of psychical research history. The book focuses on developments in England for the 1850–1914 period and chronicles diverse personal and spiritual quests through commitment or involvement in spiritualism and psychical research. As Oppenheim writes in the introduction:

That the Victorian age was a period of religious uncertainty is beyond question. . . . Victorians themselves were fully aware that the place of religion in the cultural fabric of their times was scarcely secure. In an effort to counter that insecurity, to calm their fears, and to seek answers where contemporary churches were ambiguous, thousands of British men and women in the Victorian and Edwardian eras turned to spiritualism and psychical research. (p. 1)

In her discussion, the author divided the book in eight chapters and three general parts emphasizing aspects of British culture and science such as religion, psychology, and physics in their relationships to the topic in question.

Part I, "The Setting," contains two chapters that describe some of the persons involved in this history. Mediums (such as D. D. Home) and their manifestations are discussed along with the organizations (e.g., British National Association of Spiritualists), periodical publications (e.g., *Borderland*, *Spiritual Magazine*), and persons important to early spiritualism in England, such as E. W. Cox, C. C. Massey, and W. T. Stead. Brief descriptions of their activities not only include their involvement with spiritualism but also put them in the context of their general intellectual interests and social activities.

The role of magicians in spiritualism also receives attention. It is argued that "conjurers in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century convinced some observers that forces and faculties were at work with which humanity had never yet come to terms. In

the second half of the century, mediums could reap where magicians had sown" (p. 26).

In Part II, "A Surrogate Faith," it is stated that spiritualists in Victorian times tried to "deplore and combat the materialism that they perceived as all too rampant in their time" (p. 61). This topic is developed in three chapters, two of which discuss Christianity and Theosophy. The third chapter introduces the reader to the founders of the SPR and some of their early work. Included here are discussions of the work and intellectual background of Edmund Gurney, Frederic W. H. Myers, and Henry Sidgwick, as well as details of the formation and tensions within the SPR. "The scenario that unfolded in those years," writes Oppenheim, "did not bring spiritualists and psychical researchers into ever greater unanimity of purpose and outlook, but brought into sharper focus the possibilities for misunderstanding that existed between them" (p. 139). Differences of opinion regarding the mediumship of William Eglinton, some of which appeared in SPR publications, are a case in point.

Other aspects of the SPR discussed are the paper by Hodgson and Davey on malobservation and lapse of memory, *Phantasms of the Living*, and the studies of Eusapia Palladino. But I am afraid that the description of the work by Hodgson and Davey, as well as that of *Phantasms of the Living*, is too brief to inform the reader about the assumptions, methods, and results of such projects. Admittedly, Oppenheim's purpose in this chapter (and in the book as a whole) is not to focus on methodology or research findings, but it should be recognized that these aspects are also important to understand the meaning these researches had for the persons here discussed. Also, more should have been said about positive and negative reactions to *Phantasms of the Living* at the time of publication since this not only was the first major work of the SPR, but also received considerable publicity in many publications.¹

In the discussion on Palladino, Oppenheim affirms that in the 1894 investigation of this medium by SPR members at Carqueiranne, "Myers and Lodge were certain that they were witnessing the real thing, at least some of the time. The Sidgwicks were, as ever, guarded and noncommittal . . ." (p. 150). There is, however, evidence that suggests that the Sidgwicks had a more positive attitude than the one mentioned by the author. This may be seen in their discussion of a

¹See, for example, A. T. Innes (1887), "Where are the letters? A cross-examination of certain phantasms," *Nineteenth Century*, vol. 22, pp. 174-194; and C. L. Morgan (1887), "Supernormal psychology," *Nature*, vol. 35, pp. 290-292.

report of the séances in question presented by Oliver J. Lodge at the 68th General Meeting of the SPR.²

The chapter finishes with the statement that "the voice of detached scientific inquiry" (p. 158) did not speak through the SPR research. Religion is considered to be the root of the problem. As Oppenheim writes:

Although repudiating orthodox Christianity, they longed to find some other basis for the ethical precepts they cherished and some reassurance that all human suffering was not utterly devoid of purpose. Implicitly they sought to use science to disclose the inadequacies of a materialist world view and to suggest how much of cosmic significance scientific naturalism failed to explain. (p. 152)

Myers is considered to be the best representative of this position. In the author's opinion:

Myers is an easy target for ridicule. He was so unguarded in his enthusiasms, so willing to emphasize the positive and minimize the negative findings in all his investigations.... (p. 153)

Myers' religious temperament always pulled him toward the universal, where the splendor of his vision frequently obscured the clarity of his thought.... In his most exalted moments... [he] completely abandoned the language of the scientist. (pp. 154–155)

There is much to agree with regarding these criticisms, as Gauld has pointed out,³ although it could be argued that Myers's theory of the subliminal mind (discussed later in the book) is in a better position than are his more metaphysical and difficult-to-follow concepts on the soul. Nonetheless, I would question the sweeping generalization that Myers minimized the negative findings in "all his investigations," and that "he distorted and misinterpreted" (p. 154) psychological findings in favor of religious considerations. Even conceding the point (and I agree with this in some specific instances), Oppenheim's discussion does not seem convincing since she does not present specific examples of such problems.

Part III, "A Pseudoscience," focuses on aspects of Victorian science and its relationship to spiritualism and psychical research. Three excellent chapters explore these issues in the context of psychology, biology, and physics.

²Eleanor and Henry Sidgwick's positions may be found in their (1894), "Discussion of Professor Lodge's paper," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 6, pp. 339–341, 345.

³See A. Gauld (1968), *The founders of psychical research*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 278, 300, 304–305.

A chapter on "concepts of mind," in my opinion the most interesting in the book, discusses the development of neurological, psychophysiological, and psychological concepts of the mind and psychic phenomena. Phrenology and mesmerism are the first two topics considered. "Early in the nineteenth century," the author writes, "phrenology both encouraged a clinical interest in cerebral functions within the expanding expertise of the medical profession and celebrated the uniqueness of each man, woman, and child as a moral being" (p. 210). The movement was of considerable importance in the development of 19th century concepts of cerebral localizations of functions as opposed to ideas involving the concept of unitary brain functioning defended by Flourens and others. The "localizationist" approach started to be accepted with the development of clinical studies of aphasia by Broca and others, and by the experimental work of researchers such as Fritsch and Hitzig.⁴ Also interesting, but not mentioned by the author, is the interest the phrenologists had in phenomena that also interested the early psychical researchers. Examples are apparitions, dreaming, state-specific memory, and double personality.⁵

Mesmerism and its concepts of fluids are considered by Oppenheim in the chapter. As she writes, "[I]mponderable fluids for explanatory purposes . . . provided an important thread connecting spiritualism with mesmerism. . . . Many spiritualists embraced aspects of fluidist theory as subsidiary parts of their overall world view. . . . Such fluids were useful to the spiritualist, as to the psychical researcher . . ." (p. 218) to explain thought transference and physical phenomena. A more detailed study of these concepts is needed. Among other aspects, we could identify the source assumed to manipulate such energies (e.g., living and discarnate agency), and see the issue in the context of nervous forces postulated to explain body functions in 18th century neurology.

It is argued that mesmerism expanded into spiritualism, among other factors, because: "Each created a blend of theory and practice that could appeal strongly to a population wanting scientific authorization for its faith and the blessings of religion upon its scientific discoveries. . . . In both spiritualism and animal magnetism, the role

⁴For a review of these and other developments, see R. M. Young (1970), *Mind, brain and adaptation in the nineteenth century: Cerebral localization and its biological context from Gall to Ferrier*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁵See G. Combe (1838), *A system of phrenology*, Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, pp. 472-478 (apparitions), 478-481 (dreaming), 486-490 (state-specific memory); see also H. Watson (1836), "What is the use of the double brain?" *Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, vol. 9, p. 611 (double personality).

of the medium or mesmerist, when involved in healing, assumed as much the priest's as the physician's function" (p. 222). Also relevant to the transition from mesmerism to spiritualism is the observation that "magnetic trance" was the precursor of "the similar mediumistic state," particularly because of alleged ESP phenomena also shown by the mesmerized subjects (p. 218). Another potentially contributing factor that goes unmentioned is that some of the mesmerized subjects presented phenomena that later became an important part of mediumship. I am referring to "spiritualistic" visions of the mesmeric subjects, such as those involving spirits and the spirit world.⁶

Aspects of 19th century psychology are also discussed in their relation to psychic phenomena and spiritualism. As Oppenheim says regarding neurological ideas, "A considerable medical literature developed in the second half of the nineteenth century that related hallucinations, clairvoyance, automatism, and entranced states in general—including somnambulism and hypnotism—to abnormalities of the nervous system" (p. 244). An excellent case in point are W. B. Carpenter's ideas, particularly those on ideomotor activity and unconscious cerebration, which are discussed by Oppenheim. Carpenter's insistence on the necessity of specialized training and knowledge to study the topic in question (see pp. 243–244) should be seen in the context of the issue of professionalization of medical specialists in 19th century neurology and psychophysiology. Physicians were in competition with spiritualists and amateur investigators in the study of the issues and phenomena of spiritualism.⁷

The rest of the chapter is devoted to SPR-related work, particularly that of Gurney and Myers. Gurney's hypnosis experiments are briefly presented, but more attention is given to Myers's ideas on the subliminal mind. His concepts are clearly summarized in a few pages together with critical comments. Among these, it is stated that, "Myers himself never managed to reduce the subliminal strata to anything like precision or clarity" (p. 257).

Myers's ideas on the importance of the right brain hemisphere, an important aspect of the history of the relationship between psychical research and neurology, are not considered in the book reviewed here. This may explain Oppenheim's question about the possible in-

⁶See, for example, J. W. Haddock (1851), *Somnolism & psychicism* (2nd enlarged ed.), London: James S. Hodson, pp. 181–203.

⁷On this issue, see the recently published studies of E. M. Brown (1983), "Neurology and spiritualism in the 1870s," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 57, pp. 563–577; and S. E. D. Shortt (1984), "Physicians and psychics: The Anglo-American medical response to spiritualism, 1870–1890," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, vol. 39, pp. 339–355.

fluence of neurologist John Hughlings Jackson "on Myers at the time when he was formulating the theory of the subliminal self" (p. 457). Myers's main paper on the subject of hemispheric functions mentions Jackson several times and comments on Jackson's concepts. The paper also presents several references to some of Jackson's publications read by Myers that suggest some ways in which Jackson's ideas, such as those on the evolution and dissolution of the nervous system, may have influenced Myers's concepts in the admittedly limited context of the paper in question.⁸

Overall, Oppenheim says that the SPR members "deserve credit for the way they conducted their inquiries" (p. 266). But she is quick to point out that the work was not well received by psychology or science at large except for a few psychologists. Most psychologists "held them suspect, believing that psychical research still reeked of the discredited practices of mediums, the pseudomagic of the occult, and the naive enthusiasm of the amateur" (p. 266).

Another chapter expands on the concept of evolution as it relates to spiritualism. Among the figures discussed are Robert Chambers, Charles Darwin, Francis Galton, George John Romanes, and Alfred Russel Wallace. Incidentally, "the first appearance of the terms 'nature' and 'nurture'" (p. 292) in reference to the role of heredity and environment in shaping human personality was not by Galton. He may have popularized the phrase, but it was used years before Galton first presented it in 1874, as documented in recent discussions on the topic.⁹

The final chapter covers the work and concepts of physicists such as William F. Barrett, William Crookes, Oliver J. Lodge, Lord Rayleigh, and J. J. Thomson. Religious crises, as well as physical and psychical researches, are described with great clarity and sensitivity to the issues involved. However, I wish the author had paid more attention to specific research when trying to relate psychic phenomena to physics. Crookes is described as "seeking a satisfactory naturalistic explanation for the allegedly supernatural phenomena that he observed" and attempting to "incorporate them within the known confines of the physical world" (p. 348). Nonetheless, there is little in the

⁸See F. W. H. Myers (1885), "Automatic writing: II," *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 3, pp. 1-63. Jackson is mentioned on pp. 2, 35, 39, 45, 46, 50, 52, 53, 55.

⁹See J. J. Conley (1984), "Not Galton, but Shakespeare: A note on the origin of the term 'nature and nurture,'" *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 20, pp. 184-185; K. H. Teigen (1984), "A note on the origin of the term 'nature and nurture': Not Shakespeare and Galton, but Mulcaster," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 20, pp. 363-364.

chapter regarding Crookes's explorations of physical correlates of telekinetic phenomena (an exception is the brief comments on page 349 from an unpublished letter Crookes sent to Lodge in 1915). More could have been said about Crookes's published accounts of attempts to explore the action of the "psychic force" through water, and at a distance (with no physical contact) from the apparatus used in tests with D. D. Home. Also important—but unmentioned by the author—are Lodge's writings on the source of telekinetic energy and "seat of reaction" of Eusapia Palladino's physical phenomena. Lodge also speculated on apparatus needed for a laboratory for the study of correlates (mainly physical) of psychic phenomena.¹⁰

Additionally, I wonder if the chapter should have included physical speculations by nonphysicists on the nature and workings of psychic phenomena. Examples are Gurney's discussion of the physical basis of telepathy and part of Myers's "Scheme of a Vital Faculty" on "Physical Expenditure Modified by Spirit Control."¹¹ However, these, and similar comments throughout this review, are small points dependent to some extent on personal preference and on the necessity of selecting a small number of items of information to be published from an incredible amount of relevant material.

Oppenheim's book is one of the best books in print on the history of psychical research and spiritualism. Its encyclopedic coverage makes it an excellent reference work and a valuable guide to the literature on the subject for the period in question because of its detailed footnotes (covering 88 pages) with a multitude of archival and published material. More than any other book for the chronological period covered, *The Other World* is successful in discussing its topic in the context of British scientific and religious crises and necessities. This is particularly true of discussions of the careers of Crookes, Galton, Thomson, and Wallace. Among other things, she shows how their work in biology and physics, and their religious crises and beliefs, interacted with their involvement with spiritualism and psychical research to the point that to separate them would impose

¹⁰See W. Crookes (1874), *Researches in the phenomena of spiritualism*, London: J. Burns, pp. 36, 38, 40; O. J. Lodge (1894), "Experience of unusual physical phenomena occurring in the presence of an entranced person (Eusapia Paladino)," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 6, pp. 331–333; O. J. Lodge (1894) "Appendix II to Professor Lodge's paper: On some appliances needed for a psychical laboratory," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol. 6, pp. 357–360.

¹¹Gurney's ideas can be found in E. Gurney, F. W. H. Myers, & F. Podmore (1886), *Phantasms of the living*, London: Trubner, vol. 1, pp. 111–113; Myers's are in F. W. H. Myers (1903), *Human personality and its survival of bodily death*, London: Longmans, Green, vol. 2, pp. 529–538.

an artificial distinction that might obscure their work and ideas from a larger perspective.

I wish Oppenheim had given more details on the psychical research work (i.e., methods, findings) of many of the persons discussed, as well as on classic publications such as *Phantasms of the Living* and the "Census of Hallucinations." The author's socio-historical analysis sometimes obscures the actual subject matter of spiritualism and psychical research.

It is to be hoped that other historians follow Oppenheim's example in relation to developments in other countries and study the ideas of psychical researchers in the context of their other scientific and social interests. Many figures deserve in-depth study in countries such as France (e.g., Flammarion, Geley, Richet), Italy (e.g., Bozzano, Lombroso, Morselli), and Germany (e.g., Driesch, Schrenck-Notzing, Zoller). The same may be said for the United States for figures such as Hare, Hyslop, James, and W. F. Prince. Eventually, and as diverse studies are conducted, we may be in a position to appreciate differences or similarities between developments in spiritualism and psychical research in different countries.

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DEATH AND CONSCIOUSNESS by David H. Lund. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985. Pp. x + 194. \$18.95, cloth.

Philosophers have contributed a considerable amount of material to the debate on life after death. Like everyone else, they too wonder and want to know if anything personal continues after the body dies, but unlike nonphilosophers they are equipped with skills to analyze questions that do not occur to the layman. These skills have not always led to clarity, and the literature is loaded with fallacious, but sophisticated, arguments. These arguments usually revolve around the basic question, "Is it possible for *me* to survive as an individual after my body has died?"